

Steve McClure
Union County Commissioner
Subcommittee on PL&ER Hearing 06-10-14

Thank you Mr. Chair and members of the sub-committee for the invitation to testify on H.R. 4272. My name is Steve McClure I have had the honor of serving the citizens of Union County, Oregon for nearly 24 years as a County Commissioner. During that time I have had the opportunity to observe and participate in the changes that have occurred in the management of Natural Resources.

Today I would like to relate to you the experiences of not only Union County, but also of Baker and Wallowa counties as it relates to the process the Forest Service went through to develop the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Travel Management Plan.

When the Wallowa-Whitman did their last Forest Management Plan, travel management was not included in the plan. At the same time the Umatilla National Forest did their plan and they did include Travel Management except for the Heppner Ranger District. The outcome of those resulted in a situation where two National Forests side by side on Interstate 84 had two entirely different travel restrictions-one that was extremely limited in access and the other that had no restriction at all as it related to ORV use. As you can well imagine the Forest with no restriction became the preferred recreation site for ORV recreation.

Even though the three National Forests in Eastern Oregon, together with the ten counties in Oregon and Washington, were in the process of developing a new Forest Plan notice came that the Wallowa-Whitman would also do a Travel Management Plan at the same time rather than including it in the ongoing plan process.

The Forest Supervisor of the Wallowa-Whitman made public his proposed conditions which was to close all ML 1 and reduce some ML 2 to ML 1 and at the same time assured the Counties and the local communities that it was not going to be the final outcome and invited each of the three Counties to examine the proposals and submit changes that the counties wanted

All three counties then submitted to the Forest Service the changes they wanted to see in the ROD and they were all rejected but a few minor changes in Baker County. (I have included Union County's request and rationale that we submitted as part of the record).

I could spend an hour in telling all the details of what happened but rather than that I would just like to finish by summarizing what I consider to be the major problems and issues with the Travel Management Plan for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

First, this was a top down decision. The decision had already been made with the initial proposal and the counties were involved because of public governmental requirements, but that input was never seriously considered by the decision makers. At least some part of the counties' requests could and should have been acceptable.

Second, the Wallowa -Whitman National Forest did not know or represent current conditions as they existed when they made their initial proposal. The counties discovered that almost half of the roads that were proposed for closure were no longer useable because they had naturally grown over.

Finally, the Forest Service clearly exceeded the boundaries of what was acceptable to the Local Communities as demonstrated by the largest rally of opposition to any governmental decision in my 24 years as a County Commissioner.

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Our experience with the Wallowa-Whitman Travel Management Plan clearly shows the need for H.R. 4272 which provides a chance to restore local control over these planning processes and ensure that local communities, and their needs and uses are not ignored. It is important that the counties not only participate but that there is an agreement between the Forest Service and the communities.

The following document is part of my testimony and not to be considered an attachment.

UNION COUNTY TRAVEL MANAGEMENT COMMENTS

Union County affords unparalleled recreation opportunities in the vast forests and mountains surrounding the Grande Ronde and Indian Valleys. Thousands of visitors annually hike, explore, photograph, four-wheel, cross-country ski, snowmobile, cut firewood, pick berries and mushrooms, hunt, mountain bike, or just enjoy the panoramic views, peace, quiet, and clean air. Nearly half (45% - 49%) of Union County land area is administered by the Forest Service consisting of Umatilla National Forest but primarily Wallowa Whitman National Forest. Most of these many recreational opportunities take place on Forest Service land and are intricate part of what makes Union County a great place to live.

The economic benefits of these activities are obvious and substantial; from the hunters and fisherman that stay in our motels and eat in our restaurants to the mushroom and berry pickers that purchase fuel in our gas stations and supplies in our stores. These activities depend greatly on the ability to easily access our forestland. The true value of access reaches far beyond the economic benefits. To the many individuals that choose to live and work in Union County, the ability to access a favorite spot is part of a heritage handed down from generation to generations. During our committee's work to quantify and qualify the use of our forestland, many stories were related speaking directly to this heritage. Countless citizens recounted stories of how their father took them to this place and their father before them. Rich traditions are developed around simple camps on dead end roads or jeep and OHV trails that take you farther "off the beaten path". Secret berry and mushroom patches are passed down from generation to generation. These experiences are the foundation of what defines us as a people in north east Oregon and an intricate part of our heritage. An act as simple as closing a single road may lose these traditions forever. The first conclusion the County's travel management committee would put forth is that it is impossible to capture and quantify the social value of these traditions and document specific access to them. The approximate 25,000 citizens of Union County utilize many different areas for many different uses. How is it possible to capture and quantify each citizen's use, and accurately represent the social value to that individual? Social values will absolutely be impacted by reducing the level of motorized access. Reducing access in any given area will impact those that have grown up recreating in that area.

Instead what would greatly benefit the many precious resources in our forests would be to enforce those closures that have already been made. The inability of existing closures to be maintained and enforced calls into question the ability of the Forest Service to enforce the many additional closures proposed. During conversation with Forest Service Law Enforcement Officers it has become clear that little to no additional staffing will be added as a result of this process. It was also stated that if additional staff is added, they will not be assigned to this area. It has also been made clear that the proposed closures will not be physical closures, but merely a road will be indicated closed by a chart on the back of a map. Given the limited number of law enforcement currently available, the lack of additional law enforcement foreseen in the future, and the fact that roads will not be physically closed, Union County views the implementation of more restrictive options as unsustainable and unrealistic.

Permitted access, especially collecting firewood, will be greatly impacted by reducing access. Reducing the number of access roads will largely serve to concentrate those that take part in this activity. The same could be said of many other activities including but not limited to hunting, berry picking and mushrooming. The ability to have a positive and productive experience while

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taking part in these activities will be greatly impacted by reduced access. The more users that are concentrated along limited access routes, the more difficult the activity will become resulting both the degradation of social values as well as a reduced ability to harvest fuel wood as well as berries, mushroom or game.

It is certainly true that not all Union County Citizens value motorized access as the priority recreational experience. Although, many of these users utilize various forest roads to access the road less areas. For those that value what has been termed "quiet recreation" there are currently large roadless areas and areas of regulated vehicle use. In Union County these areas include the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area, the La Grande Watershed and the Dry Beaver-Ladd Canyon Travel Management Area. In adjacent counties additional roadless areas include the North Fork Umatilla Wilderness, the Wenaha Tucannon Wilderness, The Baker Watershed, The North Fork John Day Wilderness, and the Hells Canyon Recreation Area. In the Wallowa Whitman alone approximately one-fourth of the management area is currently wilderness (586,729 acres) and over 110,000 acres of wilderness lie in Union County.

The threat of catastrophic wild fire is very real in Union County. Although the draft EIS allows for access to all roads for emergency response, the reality is that upon discontinuing active use many roads will be reclaimed by nature. As these roads currently provide access to fire apparatus, fewer roads will certainly result in less access by engine crews. Roads can certainly be reopened however this will cost valuable time during initial attack while crews wait for the proper equipment to respond and open a road. The county believes it is unrealistic to expect roads will be reopened anytime a fire breaks out near closed roads. More realistically these fires will be dealt with using less effective hand crews rather than engine crews or roads will not be opened until fires become large enough to warrant the cost and allocation of resources.

For the reasons detailed above as well as the many reasons submitted independently by the local forests users, Union County supports Draft Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative.

Since the release of the draft EIS it has been made clear to Union County that Alternative three will not meet the many stringent requirements applied by the various resource agencies and planning guidelines. As a result the County has spent hundreds of volunteer hours attempting to evaluate the current Forest Service road system. These evaluations were completed by one group during one season. Through no lack of effort on the part of these volunteers, the data is limited and incomplete. For example, by only surveying through one time of year it is difficult to document the changes in use during other seasons. Additionally, we were unable to complete all road systems, however we believe a good sample has been established from which a precedent can be created and applied forest wide. Union County completed a road survey in which 283 roads totaling 236 miles were identified as physically closed, inaccessible or unable to locate (see attachment 1). It is the County's assertion that prior to closing additional open roads the Forest Service should first remove all the closed and inaccessible from the inventory. A substantial number of roads could be removed to meet the many management requirements without impacting the current access. It is only after these roads have been removed from consideration that a true and accurate picture of the existing road system can be gained.

During this survey many current uses were identified (see attachment 2). As stated above, one result that was made clear during the survey is that it is impossible to document the social value of each individual road to all the citizens of Union County. Attachment 2 should be considered an example of the myriad of uses that take place on all the road systems in the forest.

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There are a few areas the County would like to specifically callout as priority areas to maintain access. The first is the Five Points Creek OHV area (see attachment 3). As the Forest Service is aware the County is currently developing the Mount Emily Recreation Area (MERA). Discussions have been underway to link MERA in to the existing Forest Service OHV trail system. The attached map and data details an existing OHV route that crosses the Five Points Creek at the Camp One Crossing. It is the County's opinion that this crossing and the connecting trails are critical to access all the open and available trails on the west side of Five Points Creek. This crossing and associated trails will allow a substantial expansion of the current Forest Service OHV ≤ 50 " trail system eventually benefitting both the Forest Service and MERA.

The second priority area is the South Fork Catherine Creek Trail (See attachment 4). Union County considers this a vital link between the 7787 and 7700 roads. Currently the trail is utilized extensively by OHV's during all times of the year. The Buck Creek area is also used by hunters, berry and mushroom pickers, wood cutters as well as an access point to the Eagle Cap Wilderness. The South Fork Catherine Creek Trail as detailed on the map and the road system in the Buck Creek area are of major social value to the citizens of Union County. The county would propose that the trails system be open year round to OHV's ≤ 50 ".

The third priority area is the Dry Beaver-Ladd Canyon and Clear Creek Travel Management Areas. These areas are currently under travel management. It is the opinion of the County that these areas should maintain the current level of access and closures. Since the existing conditions are regulating both off road travel and overall motorized access, the County sees no reason to further limit access. It has been represented to the County that some options allow for this request i.e. Option 5. However upon close inspection of Option 5 some current green dot roads do not appear on the map such as the 4300500 and 4300300. As we have been led to believe Option 5 maintains the green dot roads as open, all green dot roads should be open under this option.

The fourth priority area is the Breshears OHV Trail system. Since this area is an identified OHV trail area, the County wishes to maintain that area as built, including those Forest Service roads used to access what is currently Forest Capital property. The Breshears system is primarily maintained by the users and is utilized extensively by Union County citizens. Under Option 5 there are loop roads and connectors such as the 6205, 6210090 that are proposed to be closed or the connection is to be severed that will reduce the functionality of the trail system. As this is already a designated OHV area, it should be maintained as such.

According to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement the Travel Management process includes an annual review. It is the hope of Union County that this review be a collaborative process allowing for the reopening of roads found to be of substantial social and economic value. As a part of the annual review process Union County requests that the number and total mileage of roads currently closed and inaccessible be identified as well as those that are closed as a result of the travel management plan. Union County does not believe an accurate current condition has been represented. The County views the review process as vital to rectify the closing of roads that the community finds to be necessary and important for the many reasons listed above.